

CHILDREN'S INTERNET USE:
AN ONLINE SURVEY
OF
CONCERNED NORTH CAROLINA PARENTS



ATTORNEY GENERAL
ROY COOPER

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A MESSAGE FROM ATTORNEY GENERAL ROY COOPER

Computers and the Internet have revolutionized the way we communicate, work, shop and learn. Along with these positive changes come new dangers. Child predators who cruise the playgrounds for victims now spend time cruising the Internet. In fact, a survey by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children found that one out of every five young Internet users reported they had received an unwanted sexual solicitation online in the past year.

The North Carolina Department of Justice commissioned this survey to assess parents' beliefs and knowledge about their children's online activities. This survey is part of a larger initiative designed to protect children and educate parents about online dangers. Drawing on some of the information from the survey, my office has developed a video and accompanying resource guide. The video and guide can help parents learn how to better supervise their children online and find resources to reduce online risks. For more information, you can visit my Department's web site at www.ncdoj.com.

Together, we can help our children learn by taking advantage of exciting technology while reducing risks to their safety.



Roy Cooper
Attorney General

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Internet allows us to access a wealth of information and communicate with others, but with these positive technological advances come some very real dangers. The family computer is an open door into our homes, through which dangerous individuals may enter.

Child predators are cruising the Internet looking for potential victims. Due to their inexperience, children are especially vulnerable to receiving unwanted online sexual solicitations and being lured out of their homes to meet with strangers. It is important that parents know about the dangers their children face while using the Internet and the steps they can take to protect their children.

Purpose

The North Carolina Department of Justice, in close consultation with law enforcement and child safety experts, commissioned Fleishman-Hillard Knowledge Solutions to gauge the attitudes of North Carolina parents about their children's Internet safety. Over 1,100 North Carolina parents with at least one child between the ages of 10 and 17 were asked a series of questions about their children's online safety.

Parental Concerns About Risks Their Children Face on the Internet

Most North Carolina parents surveyed are concerned about their children's online safety. Specifically, parents are most concerned about what their children are exposed to and who their children are communicating with while online. As the survey shows:

- 67% of the parents are concerned about their children communicating with a stranger who wants to arrange a face-to-face meeting;
- 80% of parents are concerned about their children being exposed to sexually explicit material;
- Only 33% of parents are confident in their children's safety while participating in instant messaging; and
- Only 17% of parents are confident in their children's safety while participating in chat rooms.

Most parents surveyed believe they have a thorough knowledge of the Internet. The good news is that many of these Internet-savvy parents are already taking some positive steps to reduce their children's online risks. Most of the parents reported their computer is located in a highly visible room and that they often supervise their children's Internet activities.

While it is encouraging that these Internet-savvy parents are taking some precautions, the bad news is they are not taking advantage of all readily available tools. For example, almost half of these parents do not use any type of parental controls or content filtering/blocking software. According to child safety experts, parents who are not as familiar with the Internet as those surveyed are even less likely to be aware of the available tools or take protective measures.

Fortunately, the surveyed parents are interested in learning more about the way to keep their children safe online. For this reason, the Attorney General's Office is undertaking an Internet-safety initiative to educate *all* North Carolina parents about the dangers their children face online and the tools available to protect them.

INTRODUCTION

METHODOLOGY AND PROFILE OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

Methodology

Fleishman-Hillard Knowledge Solutions conducted this survey in close consultation with the North Carolina Department of Justice. Fleishman-Hillard began the process by examining other surveys on child Internet safety. This step ensured that the North Carolina Department of Justice did not replicate studies that have already been conducted by others.

Afterwards, Fleishman-Hillard used the findings from the secondary research, along with recommendations from the North Carolina Department of Justice, to draft the survey questionnaire. The North Carolina Department of Justice reviewed the questionnaire with law enforcement and child safety experts. Fleishman-Hillard incorporated this feedback into the survey questionnaire.

The survey was conducted by Survey Sampling's SurveySpot service that identified Internet households in North Carolina. Between June 22 and August 9, 2004, a total of 1,146 parents with online access and at least one child between the ages of 10 and 17 completed the online questionnaire. The purpose was to identify North Carolina parents' concerns about the risks associated with children using the Internet and what parents were doing to minimize these risks.

Profile of Survey Participants

Table 1 shows the basic demographics of the 1,146 North Carolina parents surveyed. Almost half (49%) of the parents surveyed were between their mid-30s and mid-40s and most (82%) were Caucasian.

It is important to note four caveats to this survey. First, the parents surveyed were more Internet-savvy than the typical parent (see Figure 2 and Table 4). Second, most (85%) of the parents who participated in the survey were female. Third, 29% of the survey sample had a college or advanced degree versus 23.8% of the adult population in the state.¹ Fourth, African-Americans constituted 13% of the survey sample, although they represent 22% of the North Carolina population.² In other words, the survey population slightly over-represented college-educated households and under-represented African-American households. The profile of these participants regarding their education level³ and ethnicity⁴ paralleled other national studies.

¹ STATISTICAL COMPENDIA BRANCH, U.S. CENSUS BUR., STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES: 2004-2005, 143 (124th ed., 2004-2005).

² *Id.* at 24.

³ See Kimberly J. Mitchell et al., *The Exposure of Youth to Unwanted Sexual Material on the Internet: A National Survey of Risk, Impact, and Prevention*, 34 YOUTH & SOCIETY 330, 336 (2003); *Survey Shows Widespread Enthusiasm for High Technology: Americans Love Their Computers and the Internet; 'Digital Divide' Still Exists, But There Is Good News, Too* (National Public Radio broadcast, Feb. 9, 2000) (noting that those with only a high

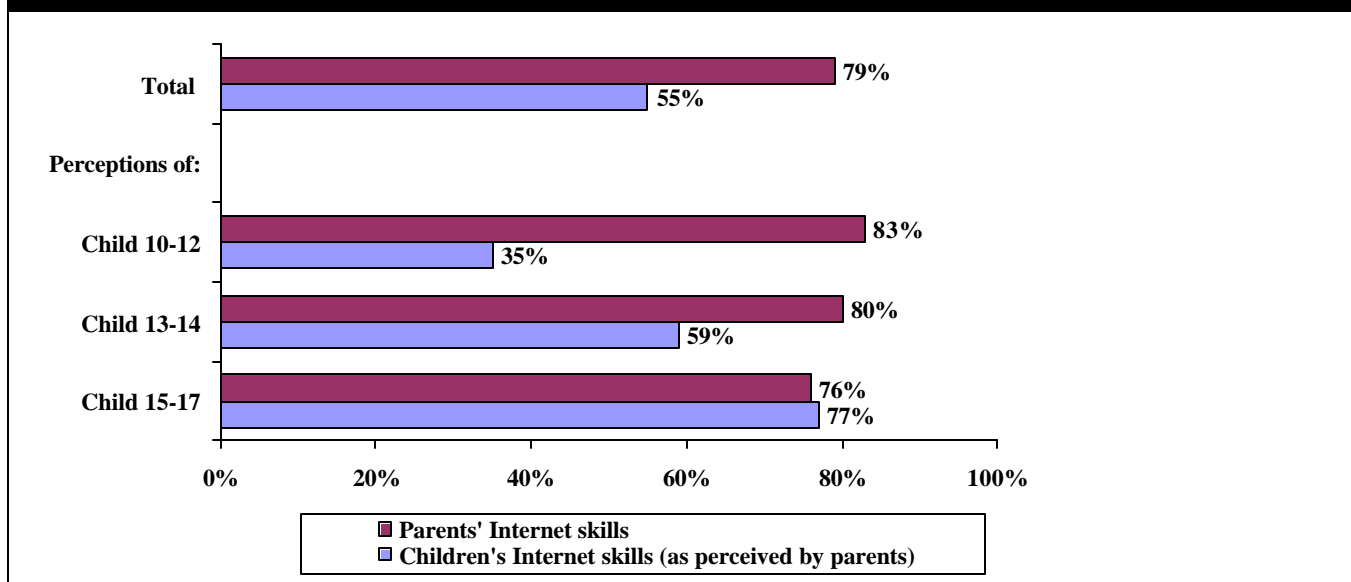
Table 1: Profile of North Carolina Survey Participants	
Sex	
Male	15%
Female	85%
Age	
21-25 years of age	1%
26-35 years of age	24%
36-45 years of age	49%
46-55 years of age	24%
56-65 years of age	2%
Over 65 years of age	*
Race	
Black or African-American	13%
White or Caucasian	82%
Hispanic-American or Latino	1%
Asian American	1%
Native American	2%
Something else	1%
No answer	1%
Highest Level of Education	
Less than a high school diploma	3%
High school graduate	18%
Some college or vocational/technical school	50%
College graduate (four-year undergraduate degree)	23%
Advanced/graduate degree or more	6%

school education or less are considerably less likely to use a computer than their more educated counterparts), *available at* <http://www.npr.org/programs/specials/poll/technology/>.

⁴ N.C. RURAL ECON. DEV. CTR., INC., RURAL INTERNET ACCESS AUTHORITY: BACKGROUND (noting that “the computer ‘have nots’ are often rural, minority, undereducated and poor”), *available at* www.ncruralcenter.org/internet/ (last visited Jan. 26, 2005); *Survey Shows Widespread Enthusiasm for High Technology*, *supra* note 3 (noting there is a gap of 11 percentage points between African-Americans and Caucasians using computers at work, but there is larger 22-point gap between African-Americans and Caucasians who have a computer at home).

Most parents (79%) in this survey identified themselves as Internet proficient, while only 55% identified their children as Internet proficient. This challenged the commonly held belief that children know more about the Internet than their parents. The survey showed that the younger the child, the more likely parents were to believe that they knew more about the Internet than their child. Figure 2 also demonstrates that the gap vanishes by the time a child reaches 15 years of age.

Figure 2: Parents Internet Skills Compared to Their Perceptions of Their Child's Skills



Figures 3A and 3B reveal another important observation. Compared to their children, as Figure 3A shows, these parents spent a great deal of time using the Internet or email. More specifically, over three-quarters of the respondents (77%) said they spent five or more hours a week using the Internet or email. In contrast, as Figure 3B demonstrates, only one-third (33%) claimed their children spent the same amount of time using the Internet or email.

Figure 3A: Parents' Internet and Email Use/Hours Per Week

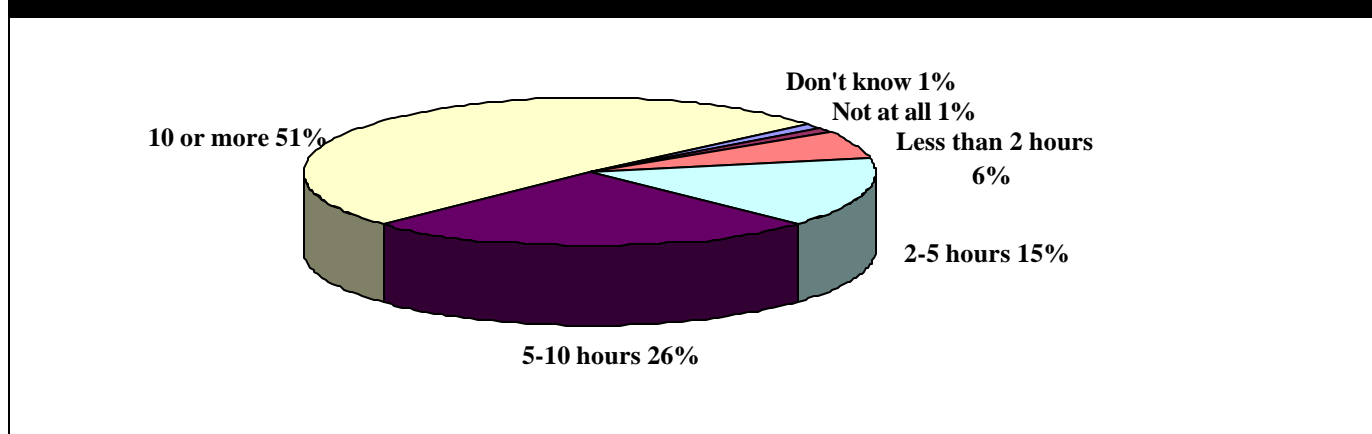


Figure 3B: Children's Internet and Email Use/Hours Per Week

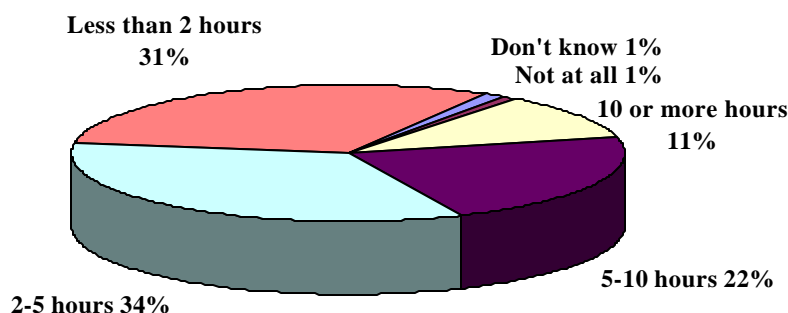


Table 4 demonstrates the survey participants' familiarity with online activities. In particular, 77% of these parents have used instant messaging, a percentage far higher than the 42% found in a recent national survey.⁵ In addition, a majority (51%) of parents surveyed have participated in chat rooms, but only 28% have set up personal profiles.

Table 4: Parents Internet Activities: Percentage Who Have Done the Following

Used instant messaging	77%
Participated in a chat room	51%
Set up a personal profile page about yourself on the Internet	28%

Limitations to the Survey

The survey sample is not entirely representative. The parents surveyed are themselves more Internet-proficient and knowledgeable than the typical North Carolina parent. This should not be surprising given the methodology of the survey.

⁵ EULYNN SHIU & AMANDA LENHART, PEW INTERNET & AMERICAN LIFE PROJECT, HOW AMERICANS USE INSTANT MESSAGING, i (2004).

PART ONE

PARENTAL CONCERNS ABOUT RISKS THEIR CHILDREN FACE ON THE INTERNET

Sixty percent of parents believed their children were at some risk for being contacted by a stranger

Figure 5 shows that about 60% of North Carolina parents believed their children were at some risk of being contacted or preyed upon by a stranger while using the Internet. In other words, when the “somewhat,” “very much” and “extremely” responses were combined, 58% of parents believed there was at least “some” risk. More specifically, 24% believed their child was “extremely” or “very much” at risk.

Figure 5: How Much Is Your Child at Risk for Being Contacted by a Stranger

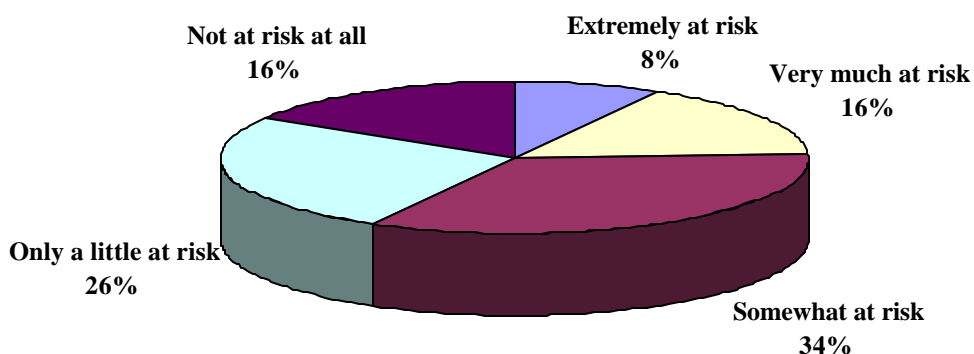
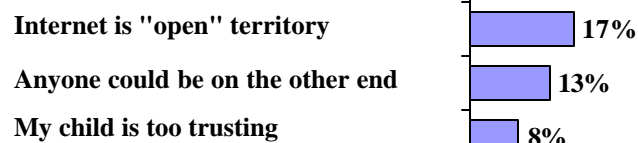


Figure 6 illustrates why parents thought their children were at risk online. Some parents (17%) thought their children were at risk because the Internet is “open territory.” These parents recognized the online world as an unmonitored electronic frontier. Slightly fewer parents (13%) thought their children were at risk because the Internet offers some degree of anonymity to its users, which allows people to disguise their true age, gender and intentions. Finally, some parents (8%) were concerned that their children were too trusting.

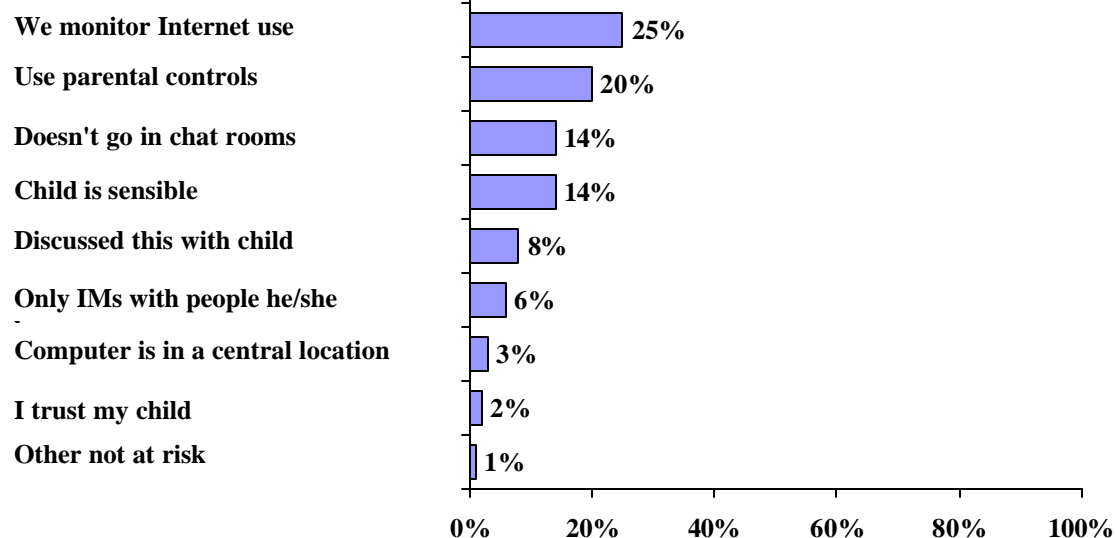
Figure 6 also lists the reasons parents believed their children are *not* at risk. Twenty-five percent of parents cited monitoring or setting limits on their children’s Internet use, and 20% pointed to using controls and filtering services for keeping their children safe online. A few parents (14%) felt their children were not at risk because they did not use chat rooms. An additional 14 % felt their children were sensible or reliable. These responses suggested that for the most part, parents who monitor their children’s Internet activities or who have some technological controls on their computers believe their children are not at risk (see Part Three for additional discussion on parental responses).

Figure 6: Most Frequent Reasons Parents Believe Their Children Are at Risk & Not at Risk

REASONS WHY AT RISK:



REASONS WHY NOT AT RISK:



Testimony from Parents About Why They Believe Their Children Were at Risk

“Although the Internet opens up the world for research, it also opens the world to your home if you aren’t careful.”

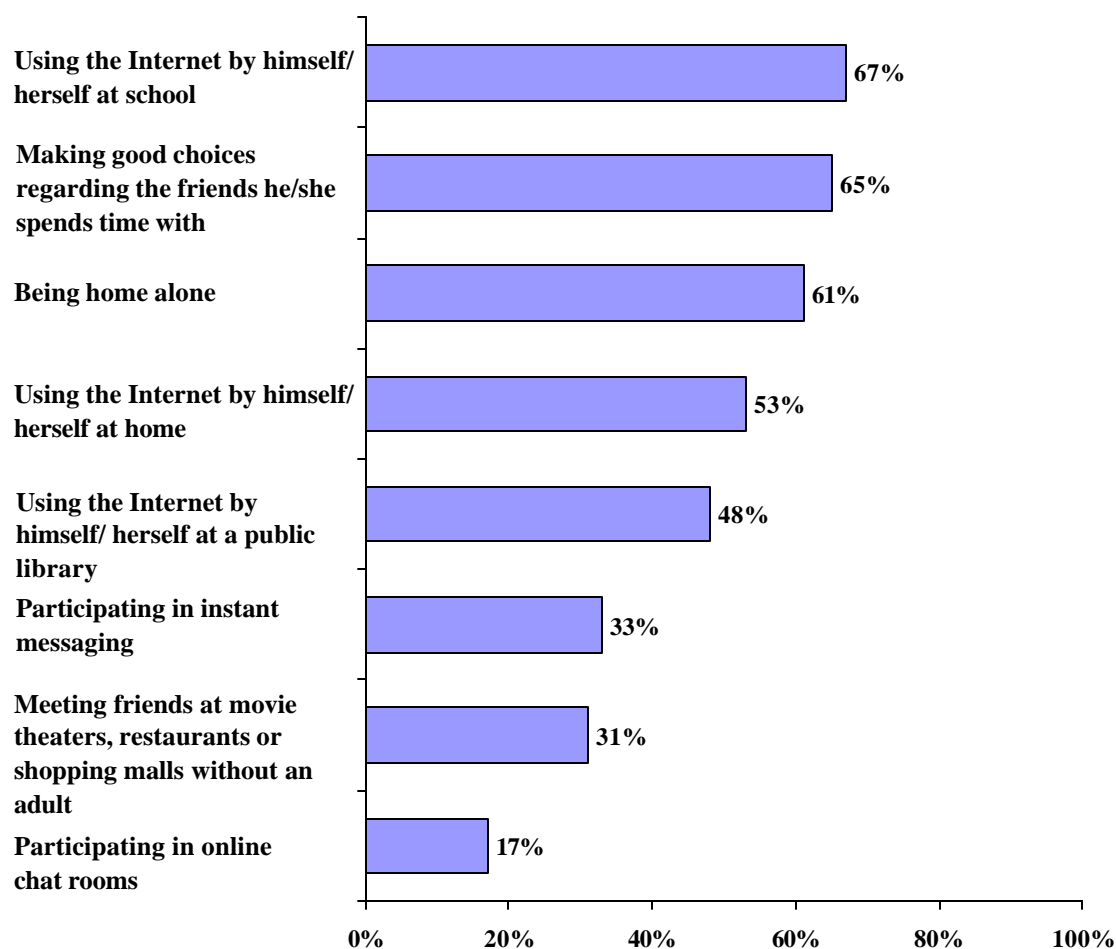
“I believe he is at risk because he is not able to see and be sure of the age or intentions of the other person online.”

“I think all children are at risk, at least to some extent, because there are always sick people just waiting for a vulnerable child to enter a chat room.”

Parents had low confidence in their child's safety while they participate in instant messaging and chat rooms

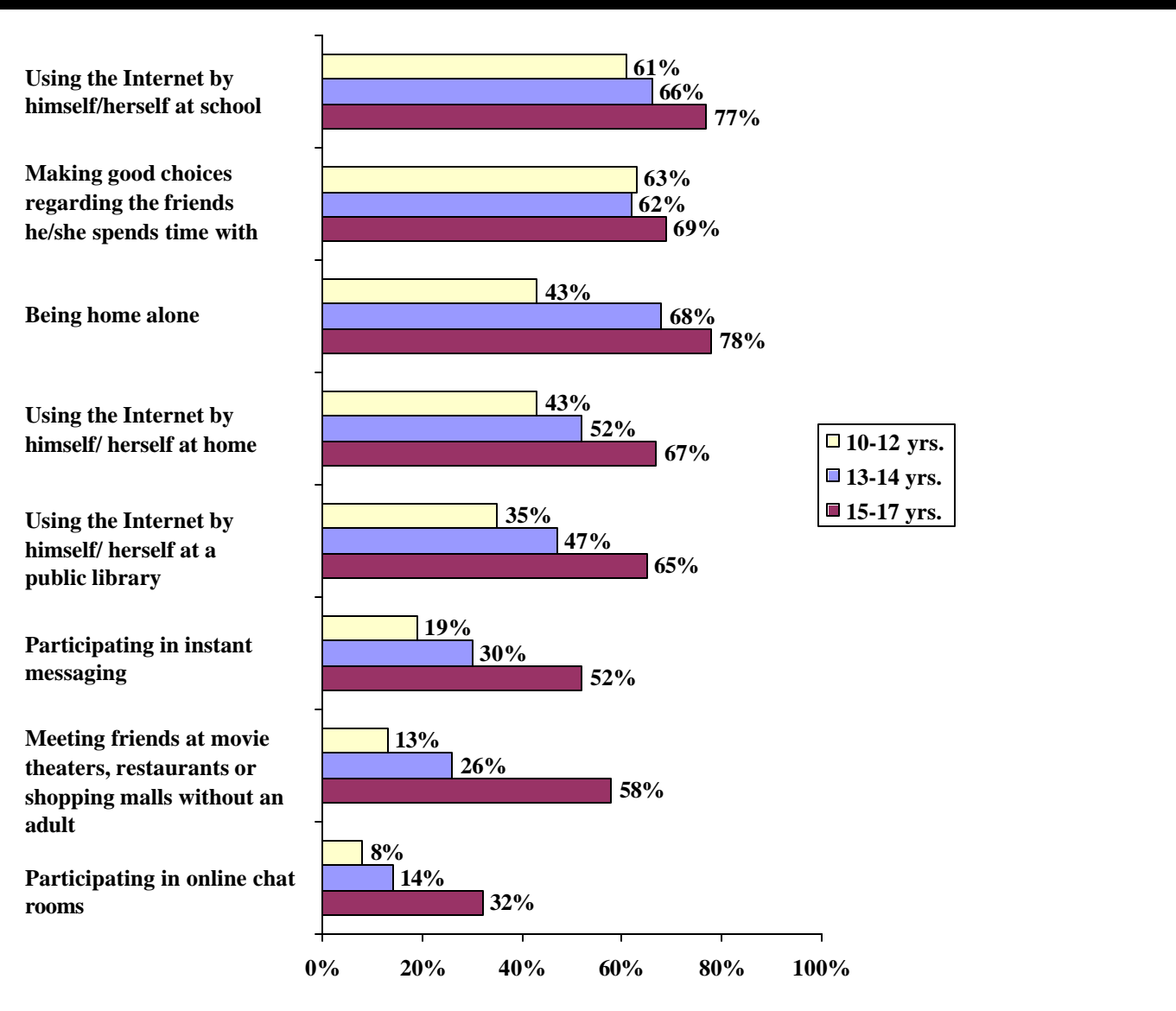
Parents had the opportunity to rate their level of confidence in their child's emotional and physical safety while doing eight different types of day-to-day activities. In particular, as Figure 7 shows, about a third of North Carolina parents (33%) had a low rate of confidence when their children participated in instant messaging ("IM"). Parents had an even lower rate of confidence (17%) when their children participated in online chat rooms.

Figure 7: Parents "Extremely" or "Very" Confident in Their Child's Daily Activities



Comparisons among different groups of parents based on the age of their children revealed that as their children got older, parents gained more confidence in their safety. In all eight activities, parents of children 15 to 17 years of age were much more confident regarding their safety than parents of younger children.

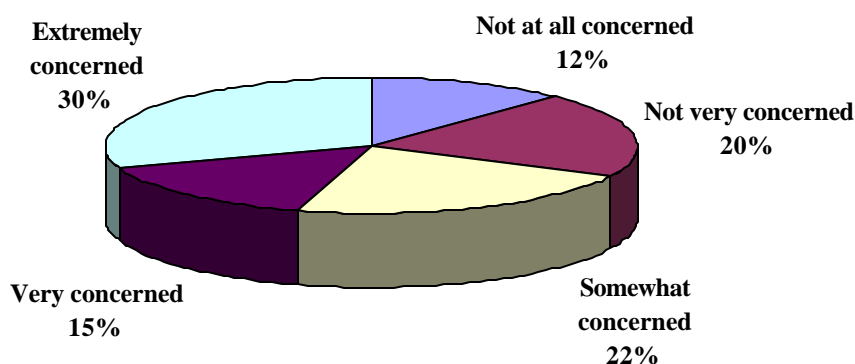
Figure 8: Comparing Parents with Children of Different Age Groups Who Are “Extremely” or “Very” Confident in Their Child’s Daily Activities



Two-thirds of parents were concerned about their children communicating with a stranger who wants to arrange a face-to-face meeting

Figure 9 reveals that 67% of North Carolina parents were concerned about their children communicating with a stranger who wants to arrange a face-to-face meeting. This represents the combined responses of those parents who were “somewhat,” “very” and “extremely” concerned about such an incident. Almost half of parents (45%) were “very” or “extremely” concerned.

Figure 9: Parental Concern About Arranging a Face-to-Face Meeting



Eighty percent of parents were concerned about their children being exposed to sexually explicit material

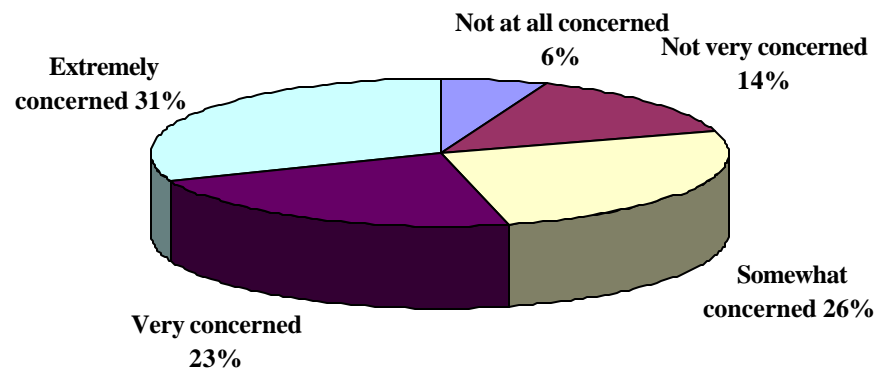
Figure 10 shows that four-fifths (80%) of North Carolina parents were concerned about their children being exposed to sexually explicit materials while using the Internet. This percentage represents the total of the “somewhat,” “very” and “extremely” concerned responses. Moreover, a majority of parents (54%) were “very” or “extremely” concerned about their children being exposed to such material.

These concerns are justified. According to a national survey of 1,501 children ages 10 to 17, one-fourth (25%) of the children were exposed to unwanted sexually explicit material while using the Internet.⁶ The majority (73%) of the involuntary exposures occurred while the children were searching the Internet, and the remaining exposures (27%) occurred when children opened an email or clicked on a link in an email or instant message.⁷

⁶ Mitchell et al., *supra* note 3, at 330.

⁷ *Id.* at 340.

Figure 10: Parental Concern About Sexually Explicit Material on the Internet



PART TWO

PARENTAL CONCERNS ABOUT HOW CHILDREN HANDLE INTERNET RISKS

Parents trusted their children on the Internet

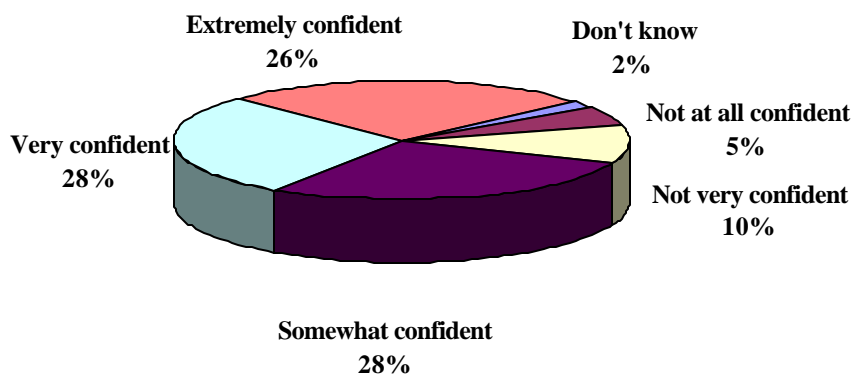
While parents remained concerned about their children, they also believed their children will do the right thing. For example, as Table 11 shows, almost all parents (93%) believed their children understand the need to be careful online, and most (76%) trusted their children's judgment to safely use the Internet. The percentage of parents who "strongly" or "somewhat" agreed their children can be trusted on the Internet increased with the child's age.

Table 11: Parents "Strongly" or "Somewhat" Agree:				
	Total	10-12 Years	13-14 Years	15-17 Years
My child understands the need to be careful on the Internet	93%	94%	93%	93%
I trust my child's ability and judgment to safely and wisely use the Internet	76%	72%	73%	84%
Sexually inappropriate materials are easy for my child to access on the Internet	54%	45%	58%	65%

More than eighty percent of parents had confidence about how their children would handle an unwanted online sexual solicitation

Figure 12 shows that 82% of parents were confident in their children's ability to deal with an unwanted online sexual solicitation. This percentage represents the sum of all parents who said they were "somewhat," "very" and "extremely" confident in their children's ability to handle such a situation.

Figure 12: Parents' Confidence in Child About Unwanted Online Sexual Solicitation



**Testimony from Parents About Why They Believe
Their Children Are Not at Risk**

“Because as parents we monitor his Internet use, and we have very specific rules about no chat rooms or sites that ask for more than a first name or any personal information.”

“I have a pop-up stopper, parental controls, and content filtering on my computer. I keep a close watch on my child while he is on the Internet. If he is on the Internet when I am away, I always check the history to see where he has been.”

“Firewalls. And her computer is monitored by parental control programs. She can only access web sites approved by parents after we visit them and log URLs in the database.”

PART THREE

PARENTAL USE OF TOOLS THAT REDUCE INTERNET RISKS

As the use of the Internet has grown, Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and child safety experts have encouraged parents to monitor their children's online activity and use parental control or filtering services. But have North Carolina parents taken these steps? The survey posed a number of questions to gauge parental use in this area.

Most parents claimed they supervise their children's Internet use

Most parents said they "always" or "sometimes" take steps to caution their children about Internet risks and monitor their children's online behavior. Table 13 demonstrates that most parents (90% or more) claimed to have talked to their children about the following Internet risks: giving out personal information online; accessing inappropriate or adult content web sites; and chatting with strangers on the Internet. At least two-thirds of parents said they have monitored their children's Internet activity by: looking at the computer screen to see what their children are doing (95%); checking the computer's history function (80%); or reviewing their children's computer files and diskettes (67%). In addition, most parents (82%) said they limit the amount of time their children spend on the Internet.

Table 13: Parents "Always" or "Sometimes" Take These Precautions	
Talk to my child about the risk of giving personal information to people he/she meets through the Internet	95%
Look at the computer screen to see what my child is doing while he/she is on the Internet	95%
Talk to my child about avoiding inappropriate or adult content web sites	92%
Talk to my child about the need to be careful when chatting with someone on the Internet whom he/she does not know	90%
Limit how much time my child can spend on the Internet	82%
Check the computer's history function to see what sites my child visited while using the Internet	80%
Check or review my child's computer files and diskettes	67%

These results may be skewed. Parents who were surveyed may have exaggerated their responses in order to appear that they have taken more steps to protect their children than they actually have.⁸ As the *Online Victimization* study conducted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children noted: "Parents might feel guilty about appearing not to have done these things."⁹ Moreover, these participants were more Internet proficient and knowledgeable than the typical North Carolina parent.

⁸ *Id.* at 346-47, 354.

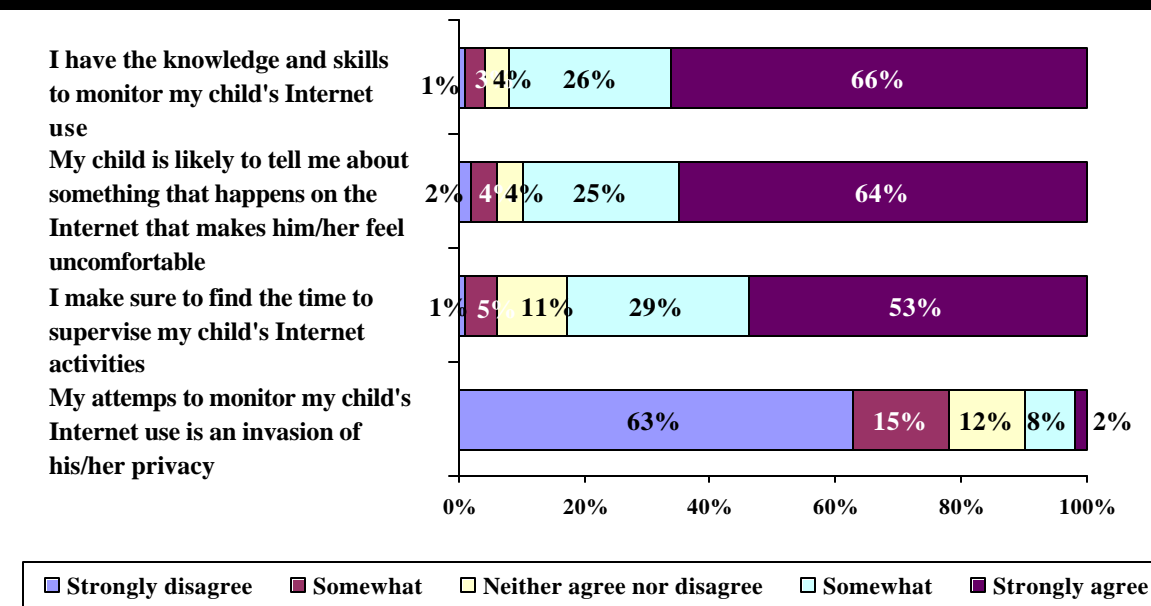
⁹ DAVID FINKELHOR ET AL., NAT'L CTR. FOR MISSING AND EXPLOITED CHILDREN, *ONLINE VICTIMIZATION: A REPORT ON THE NATION'S YOUTH* 28 (2000).

Most parents believed monitoring their children's Internet use is not an invasion of their children's privacy

According to law enforcement experts, some parents do not feel comfortable checking their children's activities because they want to honor their privacy. However, as Figure 14 shows, most of the surveyed parents (78%) believed monitoring their children's Internet use is not an invasion of their privacy. These parents seem to recognize the risks of respecting such privacy.

Most parents (92%) said they have the knowledge and skills to monitor their children's Internet use and 82% find the time to supervise their children's Internet activities. Finally, most parents (89%) agreed their children will tell them when they feel uncomfortable about something that happens on the Internet. On the other hand, a national study of teenagers found that only one-fourth of inappropriate encounters were reported to their parents.¹⁰

Figure 14: Level of Agreement



Most parents reported their children used a computer in a highly visible location

Experts recommend that parents should place their computer in a common area to help keep an eye on what their children are doing online. Parents in the survey appear to be heeding such advice. As Table 15 illustrates, most parents (88%) said their children use the computer in a visible area.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 4.

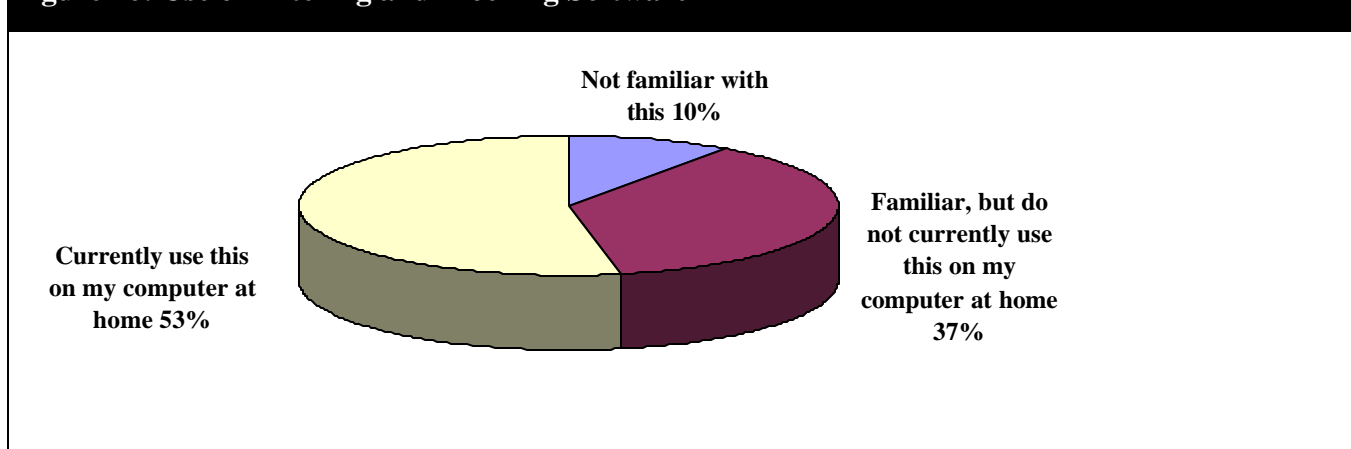
Relatively few parents reported that their children have their own computer with Internet access (15%), a web site they created (10%), or an online personal profile page (9%). As children get older, the likelihood of them having their own computer, web site or personal profile page increases significantly.

Table 15: Do Your Children Do the Following (“Yes” Answers)				
	Total	10-12 Years	13-14 Years	15-17 Years
Use the computer in a room that is highly visible and accessible to everyone in the household – like a family room or the kitchen	88%	92%	86%	84%
Have his/her own computer at home with Internet access – not a family-shared computer	15%	8%	15%	24%
Have a web site that he/she created	10%	4%	9%	17%
Have a personal profile page about himself/herself on the Internet	9%	3%	8%	17%

Almost half of parents did not use parental controls or content filtering/blocking software

Experts recommend that parents use parental controls or filtering/blocking software as a prevention measure. However, as Figure 16 indicates, almost half of the parents (47%) did not use such controls or services at home. Some parents were either unaware of such services (10%) or did not use them (37%). Only a slight majority of the Internet-savvy parents surveyed in North Carolina (53%) are taking advantage of the available parental control tools.

Figure 16: Use of Filtering and Blocking Software



Among those who were aware of parental control services but did not use them, the reasons given reflect the lack of a perceived need for them. Table 17 shows that 26% of parents claimed they supervised their children's Internet use, while 25% believed they did not need parental control services. A smaller segment of parents (10%) trusted their children or felt their children were responsible (6%). A few respondents believed that these services were too restrictive (13%) or expensive (5%).

Table 17: Reasons Filtering/Blocking Services Not Used	
Parental Supervision	26%
Don't need it	25%
It's too restrictive	13%
I trust my child	10%
Need more information	7%
Child is responsible	6%
Too expensive	5%
Haven't taken/had the time	3%
No specific reason	2%
Other	2%
Don't know/No answer	12%

Note: Adds to more than 100% due to multiple responses.

Testimony from Parents Who Did Not Use Filtering/Blocking Services

"Blocked too many things."

"Don't use it because it does not allow him to compile any research for assignments at school."

"Too restricting. Either it's very restricting, not giving him enough freedom, or it's not worth the money."

Sixty percent of parents were confident that they would know what to do if someone made an unwanted online solicitation of their child

As Figure 18 demonstrates, 60% of parents were "extremely" or "very" confident they would know how to respond if their child received an unwanted online solicitation. This percentage may reflect the attempts by government, Internet Service Providers, and community organizations to educate parents. However, two in five Internet-savvy parents (40%) reported they were not confident in dealing with this situation.

Figure 18: Children Solicited While Using the Internet

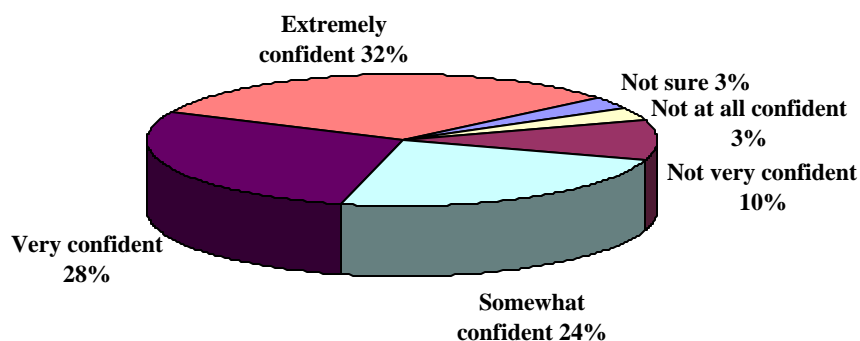


Table 19 illustrates participants' responses to an open-ended question about what they would do in this situation. Most parents (81%) responded they would contact their local law enforcement authority. One out of four parents (25%) would notify their Internet Service Providers. Some parents (16%) would track down the perpetrator, a practice strongly discouraged by law enforcement. Very few said they would have increased security on the home computer (11%) or talked to their children about the situation (5%).

Table 19: What Would You Do?

Contact the police/authorities	81%
Contact Internet Service Provider (ISP)	25%
Try to identify the person myself	16%
Increase security on computer	11%
Talk to my child about it	5%
Save all relevant information	5%
Nothing	1%
Other	2%
Don't know	4%

Note: Adds to more than 100% due to multiple responses.

PART FOUR

PARENTAL INTEREST IN LEARNING MORE TO KEEP THEIR CHILDREN SAFE ONLINE

Because the Internet continues to revolutionize the way we work and communicate, we surveyed parents' interest in learning more about Internet risks. The answers to these questions have assisted the North Carolina Department of Justice in developing tools and resources for parents.

Most parents expressed an interest in Internet safety issues for children

All respondents were asked to rate their level of interest in each of four topics regarding Internet safety for children. Overall, 75% or more of these technology-savvy parents responded they had at least "some" interest in the topics found in Table 20.

Table 20: Interest in Learning More: "A Lot" and "Some" Responses Combined				
	Total	10-12 Years	13-14 Years	15-17 Years
Behaviors or signs to look for that may indicate your child is putting himself/herself at risk when using the Internet	86%	89%	86%	82%
The types of crimes that occur against children through the Internet	84%	87%	88%	78%
How to educate your child about the risks of Internet use	79%	86%	83%	68%
How to set up and use blocks or filters on your computer	75%	80%	77%	67%

Parents preferred multiple mediums to learn about the risks associated with child Internet use

Table 21 shows that the two most popular mediums to learn about these risks were educational web sites (66%) and instructional DVDs or videos (33%). In addition, some parents preferred training at a public meeting (26%), news stories (25%) and TV/radio advertisements or public service announcements (21%).

Table 21: Preference in Learning More	
Web site	66%
Instructional DVD or video	33%
Training at a public meeting (such as a parent meeting at your child's school)	26%
News stories in the newspaper or on TV/radio news programs	25%
TV/radio advertisements or public service announcements	21%
Pamphlets/brochures/booklets	2%
E-mail	1%
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